

CHARLES STEWART "OLD IRONSIDES"

AMERICA'S LUCKIEST IF NOT GREATEST COMMODORE

AS ANDREW JACKSON Won the Greatest Land Fight of the War of 1812 After the Signing of the Treaty of Peace, So Did Parnell's Grandfather Win the Greatest Sea Fight of That War After Peace Had Been Agreed Upon—The Famous Encounter of the Constitution with the Levant and Cyane.

BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

In a day of wonderful ships and remarkable sailormen, Charles Stewart gave an exhibition of seamanship unequalled in naval warfare. With one ship he fought two ships, and not only did he capture the two, but so cleverly did he handle his own craft that never were the enemy able to deliver a broadside. He has been termed the luckiest, if not the greatest, of the commodores of that glorious 1812 period, but to skill more than to luck his success may be ascribed. He never lost a ship and he never lost a fight. His fame rests largely on one contest, that between the Constitution and the Levant and Cyane, but that one fight was a classic. It is strange that the two greatest fights of the War of 1812, the one on land and the other on sea, should have been fought after the treaty of peace had been signed. It was a month after Jackson had crushed the British at New Orleans that Stewart captured the Levant and the Cyane.

Stewart was born in Philadelphia July 28, 1778. His parents were Irish, and he was only two years old when his father died. His mother, left with four small children, had a bitter struggle to provide for her little ones. When he was eleven years old Stewart went to sea as a cabin boy. By the time he was twenty he was in command of a clipper ship. But the merchant marine had less fascination for him than the navy. On March 9, 1798, he was commissioned a lieutenant and assigned to the frigate United States. He had as shipmates Decatur, Somers and other men destined to win high honors in the service.

Obedience Orders. It was not until 1800, when he got command of the Experiment, that he began to show what stuff he was made of. No vessel in the West Indies was more active in chasing French privateers than was Stewart's little schooner. He captured the Deux Amis, and did it so brilliantly that he won the commendation of Congress. He had a fine faculty for handling men. He was a martinet, hot-headed and imperious at times, and a stickler for the rigid carrying out of his orders, but he had so many lovable qualities that his men were devoted to him. If he insisted upon others obeying his orders, he was none the less obedient to the orders of his superiors. Once he got orders to sail. The order was peremptory. His vessel was without a malmast, and he sailed. He towed his malmast and joined the fleet. Then, when opportunity offered, he stepped the mast.

In our war with Tripoli he was second in command to Commodore Preble, and he had plenty of action, but to Decatur went most of the glory of that expedition, for his dash into the harbor of Tripoli, when he burned the Philadelphia, "the most bold and daring act of the age," as Lord Nelson termed it, overshadowed everything else. Stewart, too, had a hand in that thrilling affair. He, in the Siren, accompanied Decatur, who was in the Intrepid. While Decatur entered the harbor, Stewart waited outside, prepared to go in and rescue Decatur if the attack failed, or pick him up in the event of success. In the entry in Preble's log equal credit for the success of the remarkable attack is given to Stewart and Decatur, but really it all belonged to Decatur, for Stewart's part only was that of supporting his brother officer.

A testy man was old Preble. Good fighter and good seaman though he was, he was not a good judge of men. He had a lot of youths as command-

ers of the vessels in his squadron. Decatur was twenty-six, Somers twenty-four, Stewart twenty-five. "They've given me a lot of schoolboy captains," the commodore complained. Little did he realize that each and every one of the schoolboys was his equal, if not his superior, in every department of sea warfare.

Saved the Constitution. Stewart first got his name as a lucky captain in 1813, when he was appointed to command the great frigate Constitution, sister ship to the Constitution. Out of Annapolis he sailed one day, bound for Norfolk and then for the open sea. He was high with hope when he anchored at night off Norfolk, but, alas! when morning dawned five British warships blocked his passage to the sea. Exercising every art which he could employ, he endeavored to slip past the blockading squadron, but when he began to have hopes of success, the wind failed. To save his ship now seemed doubtful indeed. The British squadron blocked the way and gradually tightened the net. Stewart's only hope was in retreat. Putting out his boats, he laboriously towed the frigate up toward Norfolk. The tide was falling, and when the Constitution reached what now is Fortress Monroe, she stuck in the mud. The British commanders, knowing there was no way out for the frigate, and not believing it possible for her to get through the crooked channel to Norfolk, felt sure of her capture. But they did not know Charles Stewart. When the tide rose and lifted the Constitution out of the mud, that night he sent the pilot ahead to mark the channel with a light. Hour after hour he towed the frigate.

When the light was reached it was extinguished and the pilot sent ahead to mark the next stage of the journey. Throughout the long winter night Stewart and his men labored silently, vigorously and well, and when morning dawned and the British admiral looked for the frigate, he looked in vain. Far up the Elizabeth River the Constitution was at anchor, safe from the British. The British blockaded her there and made half a dozen efforts to capture her. Parties in boats and parties from the shore side attacked her, but Stewart was too wary. He rigged up land batteries and rigged up the frigate. The British lost more men in these attacks than in any of the single encounters at sea, and they got such a respect for Stewart that they were not willing to venture within gunshot of the Constitution after a few experiences with his guns.

The Constitution. But if they could not capture the Constitution, they could maintain the blockade, so Stewart, chafing from his confinement, pleaded for command of the Constitution. He got it. "Old Ironsides" was in Boston, refitting, and there he joined her. The harbor was blockaded by seven British warships, but he managed to get out, and away he sailed for the West Indies. He captured several prizes and sank a cruiser, and then sailed back up along the coast of the United States. Off Massachusetts he was chased by two British frigates, the Tenedos and the Junon. They were more than a match for the Constitution, and his only recourse was in flight. To avoid his pursuers he had to keep inshore, where the depth of water was perilously small. At times the Constitution had less than two feet of water under her keel, but she had a good pilot. Crowds watched the struggle from the shore, and when the Constitution got safely into Marblehead there was great rejoicing. A few days later she slipped into Boston.

The Great Cruise. On December 1, 1814, he was out again, and then began the cruise that made him famous. He had married shortly before, and when he was bidding adieu to his bride he asked her what he should bring back to her. "A frigate," she replied. "I'll bring you two," he declared. From the prophetic Stewart made on this cruise and the way they were fulfilled the sailors got to look upon him with superstitious awe. They were off the coast of Portugal, two months after leaving Boston, and the men were restless because the trip had been marked by only a few unimportant captures, when Stewart addressed the crew and told them to be patient. "You'll have a fight within twenty-four hours," he announced. "Started in to them again as he started to go away, he added 'You'll have two

lights."

Thereupon he gave orders for a change in the course of the ship. He pointed the Constitution for a spot in the Atlantic sixty miles southwest. What possessed him to direct the vessel to that particular spot he never could explain. He simply had what a race track follower would call a "hunch," and when he got to the spot he sought he sighted the British frigate Cyane. Soon after the Cyane came into view the Constitution alone sighted the sloop-of-war Levant. The Levant looked to be about the same size as the Constitution but she was not. She had false gun ports painted amidships, and it was not until the action was well under way that Stewart realized her true dimensions.

In tonnage and in gun fire the Levant and the Cyane were a little heavier than the Constitution. This advantage should have told decidedly in a contest where two vessels were fighting one. Upon Stewart devolved the duty of keeping the two either so busy or so separated that they could not concentrate their fire on him.

The Fight. For several hours the warships manoeuvred, the captains jockeying with rare skill. It was late in the afternoon when they began manoeuvring, and it was night before the battle began. Students of naval warfare declare that there is nothing to equal the superb seamanship Stewart displayed in this engagement. As the battle began the moon arose. At times

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the moonlight was so bright that the sea was radiant. Then the moon would go behind a cloud and there would be comparative darkness. There was a fair breeze, and the ships were easy to handle.

The three warships formed a triangle which ordinarily would seem to favor the two attacking ships, but Stewart worked port and starboard batteries alternately, giving the Levant a broadside and then the Cyane another, and swinging the Constitution about so that neither of the British vessels was able to rake him. The Levant suffered so severely in the first part of the battle that she was compelled to draw away.

This enabled Stewart to concentrate his fire on the Cyane. He smothered her with broadsides until she surrendered. Putting a prize crew aboard the Cyane, he went in pursuit of the Levant. She had repaired damage, and had gallantly returned to the combat, but it was no use. Unable to withstand the fire of the Constitution, she tried to run away, but Stewart went in pursuit, and at 10 P. M. she gave up.

On the Constitution there were three killed and twelve wounded. On the British ships there were nineteen killed and forty-two wounded.

"Let Us Fight It Over."

In the cabin of the Constitution the captains of the Levant and the Cyane were bitter in reproaching each other for the defeat. One thought the other was at fault, and declared that victory would have been theirs had they supported each other properly. The two men quarrelled until it seemed they would come to blows.

Stewart sat and listened to them until he got tired. Then he said: "Gentlemen, cease this bickering. If you wish I'll put the two of you back on your ships and we'll fight the battle over again."

They looked at Stewart. So far as they could discover he was serious in his offer. They ceased reproaching each other and began to wonder what sort of individual this was they had been fighting.

Stewart took the Levant and Cyane into Porto Praya. The day after he reached there a British squadron arrived off the harbor. There was a light fog, and some of the British prisoners were fired to discover the squadron. They tried to keep the fact from the Americans, but one of the British midshipmen's indiscreet remark was heard by a lieutenant of the Constitution, and word was sent at once to Stewart. The captain was shaving.

"Boat to quarters and make ready to go out and attack," said the captain, continuing his shaving.

The order was obeyed. Then the lieutenant discovered two more ships approaching. He ran to the captain's cabin.

"Cut the cables and signal the prizes to do the same and follow us out," the captain ordered. He finished shaving, got into his uniform and went on deck. So admirable was the discipline of the Constitution that within fourteen minutes of the time of sighting the first ship the Constitution, under full sail, was standing out of the roads ready to fight or run.

The Escape. The Constitution and her prizes passed within gunshot of the British squadron, which was made up of the Acacia, the Leander and the Newcastle, each of which was about a match for the Constitution. The identity of the Americans was disclosed to those on the incoming warships by some of the British prisoners who had been landed by Stewart and who had manned a battery on shore and opened fire on Stewart's vessels as they passed out.

Stewart, menaced by three heavy frigates, signalled the Cyane and Levant to take different courses so as to force the British to divide. Luckily for the British, the fastest of the British ships, and then the other two Britishers, went in pursuit of the Levant, which they thought, because of her false ports, was a heavy frigate.

The Levant put about and returned to Porto Praya, where the British squadron opened fire on her. When they discovered she was the Levant and not a big American frigate they were disgusted. Meanwhile the Constitution and the Cyane were on their way

across the Atlantic. Stewart arrived in New York in May and got a magnificent reception. A gold medal and the thanks of the nation were bestowed upon him by Congress. A few years later he raised his broad pennant as commodore and went to Europe in the line of battle ship Franklin.

There was no better ship or better sailor on the seas in that day than the Franklin and her commander. When he returned, after Emperors and Kings had been his guests on the warship, he went to live on his estate near Bordentown, which he called Montpelier, but which came to be known later, as he, too, came to be known, as "Old Ironsides."

His Neighbor the King. There he had for a neighbor Joseph Bonaparte, once King of Naples, and once King of Spain, and now an exile. They got to be great chums. Every Fourth of July they celebrated the nation's birthday together at Bonaparte Hall. The commodore wore full uniform. By his side hung his full dress sword, a magnificent Toledo blade. There had been a gold hilt to that superb sword, but it was shot away in the fight with the Cyane and the Levant, and the armorer of the Constitution had fashioned a rude iron one in its place. The land could not hold Charles Stewart long. Back to sea he would go. He was commissioner of the navy for four years, a position practically the same as Secretary of the Navy today. There was a movement in the early forties to nominate him for the presidency, but he squelched it.

On May 21, 1835, his daughter Della married Charles Henry Parnell, and she became the mother of Charles Stewart Parnell, who will be ranked by historians perhaps as the greatest leader the Irish people ever have had.

In 1856 Stewart was senior commodore of the American Navy. In 1859 he was flag officer. In 1862 he was commissioned rear-admiral. On November 8, 1869, in his ninety-second year, "Old Ironsides" died. For seventy-two years he was in the service of the United States, and he was on waiting orders when he died.

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